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## THE PRESCRIBED WORK IN COLLEGE ENGLISH: ITS RELATION TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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The first two years in college offer to the student in most institutions two elementary courses in English: one in composition and one in literature. The admission of Freshmen or Sophomores to more advanced courses varies in different institutions according to the way in which the elementary courses are administered.

Most of the colleges and universities of the country require students entering with three units of English to take in college in their Freshman year one three-hour course (or its equivalent) in English composition. A considerable number of institutions require a second course in English, an elementary course in literature, taken usually in the Sophomore year. Though the number of colleges requiring two years of English is small and growing smaller, it still includes such institutions as the University of Iowa, the University of Minnesota, the University of Texas (advanced composition is allowed here as an alternative to the course in literature), Northwestern University (one semester each in Freshman and Sophomore years) the University of Washington, Washington University, and Goucher College. Most institutions in any case require this course for students intending to do major work in English, and make it a prerequisite for other English courses.

It is my belief that these two elementary courses are for the most part wastefully negative in function. They are given chiefly to prevent trouble. They are founded on the supposition (not always easy to disprove) that the high-school training in English is of little value; that the college must lay its own foundations before the student can be trusted to enter upon new and intensive work in English or in any other subject requiring competence in organizing material and in stating facts.

This distrust of the teaching a student has received in the preceding stages of his education is responsible for overlapping of curricula in the Freshman year in high school and in the Freshman year in college. The makers of college curricula have been faced by two dangers: the danger of trying to raise upon uneven and unstable foundations the superstructure of advanced study; and the danger of wasteful duplication of high-school work. Almost unanimously they have considered uneven foundations the greater menace in English, and have avoided it by almost total disregard of the danger of duplication, requiring in the first years of college courses which in their content and even, in some cases, in their very textbooks duplicate the work which the college itself has set down in its own catalogue as requisite for entrance.

Let me illustrate specifically this duplication of entrance requirements by prescribed courses in college, for it seems to me one of the most important problems we have to solve. I choose as an example the college whose requirements are freshest in my mind, but the generalizations might be made about other endowed institutions and about state universities in a little different measure.

Wellesley College requires three units of English for entrance. To make sure that these units are of proper sort it expounds the specific requirements in its catalogue as follows:

Correct spelling and grammatical accuracy should be rigorously exacted in connection with all written work during the four years [of high school]. The principles of English composition governing punctuation, the use of words, sentences, and paragraphs should be thoroughly mastered. . . . Written exercises may well comprise letter-writing, narration, description, and easy exposition and argument. It is advisable that subjects for this work be taken from the student's personal experience, general knowledge, and studies other than English, as well as from her reading in literature. . . . To meet the requirements in composition there should be practice in writing equivalent

to weekly themes the first two years, and fortnightly themes the last two years of the preparatory course. Themes should be accompanied by simple outlines.

Among the textbooks suggested for use are those two often used in college classes, Herrick and Damon, and Manly and Rickert. In regard to literature, we read that the student "is further advised to acquaint herself with the important facts in the lives of the authors whose works she reads and with their place in literary history." These statements from the Wellesley catalogue are noteworthy because, in the main, they are taken verbatim from the definition of requirements published by the College Entrance Examination Board which forms the basis of admission to most of the Eastern and to a number of the Western colleges.

Now if we state that our students have "thoroughly mastered" before entrance to college the principles governing grammatical usage, punctuation, spelling, paragraphing, sentence-structure, and simple outlining, and shall have acquired skill in the application of these principles through weekly or fortnightly themes involving exposition, narration, description, argument, and letters, why should we (especially when we have already given entrance examinations to test the quality of this instruction), why should we prescribe at once a college course, beginning, perhaps, with letter-writing, and proceeding through the writing of expository, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative themes, for the whole of a year, with a thorough drill in outline, paragraph, sentence, and word, taking the student over the very ground he has by our own order traversed in high school, on the basis of which he has been admitted to college?

Of course I realize that there are other elements which enter in to reduce the apparent inconsistency of our practice. Correct writing and speaking on the part of girls and boys whose habits of a lifetime outside of English class have been bad can only be achieved through unremitting effort on the *student's* part to improve his *habits*, with constant training of mind and ear through *practice*. The writing of college graduates so often publicly condemned is proof, for the most part, of *bad habits*, not of bad *instruction*. Our problem in college, however—the problem of no one department but of the college as a whole—is to direct the student's attention to the improvement he has already begun in his writing habits, to

keep him to the practice of what in theory he has already learned in high school and has practiced already in some measure; to hold him to this without waste of time through unnecessary reiteration of precepts which he should be assumed to understand. In a word, we must get some leverage on the student's writing habits in connection with all his fifteen hours of work during every college year, and not rest easy when we have forced him to make a C in one three-hour Freshman course.

I know from the comment of competent high-school teachers that some of our Freshmen write more inaccurately in Freshman courses in college than they did in high school. This deterioration is probably due to the fact that the quantity of their writing in all courses in college has immensely increased, so that they are writing with unprecedented rapidity at the same time that they are relieved from the critical scrutiny to which their high-school written work was more generally subjected. Our problem, I repeat, as I see it, is not to give the student additional training in the theory of composition, but to make him use continuously the training he has already had, training to be more carefully adapted to such a régime by the joint ingenuity of high-school and college teachers in conference assembled.

For such students as we allow to enter college in need of further training in composition, I believe the college should provide an intensive course definitely concentrated on accurate expression for practical ends, as definitely utilitarian as the course offered in many institutions for engineers and others in professional schools. It should not try especially to be a vehicle of general culture, nor concern itself with the subtleties of creative art. General culture should be one of the products of the whole curriculum and should be pursued as such; and the art of writing should be considered the proper province of a restrictive elective course.

The course in composition required for all degrees should be, I believe, so far as the college gives it at all, a drill course in organization (in sentence-structure, vocabulary, and usage, as needed), with a view to the correction of bad habits and confirming of good ones; but especially it should be a study of the conventions of bibliography and footnotes, of note-taking, and of the treatment of sources as a basis for the writing of papers in all other college

work. The English teacher should concentrate on developing this skill which every student needs in *all* his work, and should omit the effort to inculcate many ideas and aptitudes which are valuable and interesting in themselves, no doubt, but which are inevitably presented by the English teacher in a somewhat superficial way for the sake of inspiring students to write themes on subjects which neither he nor his English instructor is really fitted to treat. The present course in amateur sociology, economics, politics, education, and what not, offered in the guise of English composition, is making the English teacher a charlatan and his pupils glib jugglers with the half-understood facts and phrases which feed their passion for the superficial survey, and take the edge of novelty from the more earnest investigation of these subjects. The patient smile and courteous reticence of our colleagues in other departments as they observe our intrepid invasion of their special fields should give us pause.

A required course in composition concerned with the sharpening of tools for all our college work might, conceivably, be only half as long as our present course of miscellaneous content. The time thus liberated could be devoted by the student to one or another of several elementary courses of specific content directly related to his particular interests, courses which would require frequent papers in the natural order of the work, and would give to the technique of these papers more than usual scrutiny.

This reduction of the time now given to a composition course padded with miscellaneous material and duplicating high-school work would have the administrative advantage in large institutions of eliminating many inexperienced, overworked, underpaid, disgruntled, and unproductive instructors from the departmental personnel.

But I believe we need to do more than merely provide a new type of intensive course for the training of students of defective habits of writing. I think we need to secure both wisdom and machinery for carrying out a larger program wide enough in its scope to exact the co-operation of all teachers, both of English and of other subjects in high school and in college. Without minimizing at all the practical difficulties we face let me set up what some may consider a Utopian program with four provisos.

1. My first proviso is that the college shall set up an attainable standard of technical proficiency in writing as a basis for entrance to college. (The state institutions, I suppose, would need to make the standard a prerequisite to progress rather than to entrance.) Let this standard be formulated, once more, by a joint conference of college and high-school teachers who think of themselves and their attainments no more highly than they ought, and who with an honest eye on what they actually do will agree to hold themselves responsible for that measure of proficiency on the part of students admitted to college.

At present it is my observation that the high schools and preparatory schools in the East are so dominated by the colleges that entrance requirements become a vicious complex producing various defensive reactions and suppressions. Whereas in the West the colleges are so dominated by the secondary schools that they have too little control over the preliminary training on which they must found advanced study. I am quite aware of the invaluable work on the Reorganization of English in the Secondary Schools, the results of which were published in 1917 under the efficient editorship of Mr. Hosic, which was in part a protest against the domination of the secondary schools by the college. And I likewise recall the report of the Iowa State Teacher's Association in 1919 which was frank in its contempt for "certain college and university professors and instructors" who "are still clinging to the lists formulated by the Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements in English" to the neglect of "recent material and the modern point of view." This report expounds the "many universal values in the teaching of English" concluding that "nothing is to be taught for its own sake or with the aim of doing justice to a certain body of subject-matter, but with the thought of developing mind and spirit." This transcendental ideal may account, of course, for some of the verbless sentences with which I struggled in the year 1919 in the themes of Iowa Freshmen. What I wish to emphasize is that we have not yet agreed upon a definite minimum of essentials in English to which colleges and high schools will stand equally committed. We do not give the student himself at certain stages of education recognizable standards by which he knows he must stand or fall. Our problem as teachers of

English would be immensely simplified if we could make each student know that he had been taught certain definite things for which ever after he will be held responsible.

2. My second proviso is that the college shall evolve machinery for enforcing this standard as a prerequisite to college work. Progress toward this end is being made by several institutions by somewhat different methods founded on policies ranging from the assumption that a college has a merely supplementary function in connection with the student's secondary-school work in English, to the radical doctrine that all training in composition as a common utility is a purely high-school function for which the college need assume no responsibility beyond a penalty for negligence. In general there seem to be four stages to the colleges' declaration of independence.

a) A general entrance examination. The College Entrance Examination Board for all the contempt it suffers at the hands of educational committees does yet something valuable in upholding a standard, however low. I know from my own experience as Reader for the College Entrance Board that there is a degree of inaccuracy and incoherence that will keep a student out of college. My complaint is that we pass too often on merely negative virtues. But I am sure that as a result of such an examination my two sections of Freshman composition at Wellesley this year are of an average proficiency and an evenness of attainment superior to any classes I have had in any of the five Western institutions which I have known. It is possible, therefore, by examination to approximate some evenness of preparation, and to enforce some standard at entrance. Our business is to make this standard more practicable and less vague.

b) A further step in this direction is taken by colleges which pursue some such plan as that by which Harvard tests and classifies the students whom the entrance examinations have admitted to its Freshman class. Harvard aims to avoid duplication to which I have referred by means of an anticipatory English examination. According to the statement in the Harvard catalogue:

A candidate for admission who passes the anticipatory examination in English called English A is exempt from the prescribed English in the Freshman year (English A); but if he passes it with a grade of D he is required



to take before the end of his second year a half-year course in English composition (English D) in addition to his regular elective courses. A Freshman who anticipates English A is not required to replace it by other work, and if he does so he is charged for an Additional Course.

Some form of this system of anticipatory examination which operates on the assumption that *some* students in high schools have had *superior* preparation which enables them to pass off the Freshman course is found at other institutions, notably Chicago, Northwestern, and the University of Oregon. This examination differs radically in aim from that which is given at several other universities to discover the students not above but *below* the Freshman grade, and hence in need of a sub-Freshman course. Such students are more especially the problem of the system of accredited high schools.

c) A third and more radical method of enforcing a standard of preparation is that in operation at the University of California in which the usual Freshman English course is definitely declared high-school work, and students proved by examination to be in need of this course are required to get it without college credit. The procedure I can best explain by reading parts of the letter on the subject kindly written me by the supervisor:

As you see from the printed matter sent you, Subject A is required of all who enter the University with undergraduate standing. The examination is given on the Saturday preceding the Tuesday on which our regular work begins—last August we had about 2,600 students taking it; in January there will be perhaps half that number. We parcel the books out among a corps of readers—all trained as best I can train them in a short course given for the purpose. . . .

A student who fails in the examination with grade E or F must repeat the examination, and cannot attain Junior standing until he has passed it. We have had a course, "English A," to prepare students for re-examination, but it lapsed this year, and very likely will not be given again as in the past. It is, of course, a course in high-school English, and really has no place in the university. We are trying now to work out a plan by which it may be given by the Department of Education as practice work for teachers of English for high schools. We feel much the same about the next course of Freshman English, English IX, which is required of students who "pass" Subject A with grade C or D. This means that further work in English is needed; that is to say that the high-school work has not been satisfactorily done. It is a very large course and a heavy burden on the Department—most of us would be

glad to throw it back on the schools where we feel that it belongs. In this course, the passing grades, C and D, are the equivalents of A and B in Subject A.

A student who receives grade A or B in Subject A, or who passes English IX, may (but is not required to) take English IA, the next higher course. Both English IX and English IA are semester, not full year, courses. A pass grade in IA or an honor grade in IX admits a student to the next higher course, English IB.

It is of great interest, however, to note the history of such an experiment at Leland Stanford Junior University. This institution also gives a matriculation test to students on entrance. This, according to the catalogue, tests "the candidate's ability to write exercises not only free from marked deficiencies in spelling, punctuation, sentence-structure, and paragraphing, but also indicate his ability to think consecutively on a simple subject." About 50 per cent of the students, I am told, fail to pass the test, whereupon they are consigned to a course in sub-Freshman English, with an extra fee and no college credit, where they remain until in the judgment of the instructor they are capable of writing with reasonable clearness and without serious mechanical errors. The period varies from two or three weeks to a year or more.

After trying the experiment of requiring no further work in composition, Stanford this year has introduced into the Sophomore year a required course in composition, of two quarters, three units each quarter. The work in the first quarter is given over to narration and description, and that in the second quarter to exposition. Miss Mary Yost who has this year gone from the English department of Vassar College to be Dean of Women at Leland Stanford writes:

From your letter I had gathered that you had seen a Stanford catalogue before the required English course for the Sophomore year was put in. That course corresponds practically to our Freshman-year course at Vassar and was added to the requirements this year for the first time because the students so manifestly needed further training. You see English A was only for those students who were not up to college work. In fact, they are the students who would have failed in a college-entrance examination in English. . . .

I am teaching a section of the required course, English II, and I find, even in the Sophomore year, that many of the students are less able to write clearly and directly than our Freshmen. There is much greater difficulty with elementary technique. . . . This course was put in Sophomore year, as far as I can learn, for two reasons. So many of the students have to take the

sub-Freshman work that it was decided best not to start any of them with the required work until all could take it, and then also many drop out Freshman year, and it made an easier piece of work for the English department to undertake if this required course came Sophomore rather than Freshman year. As far as I can find there is no theoretical advantage in having this course Sophomore year.

It is my conviction, however, that we should all assume, if not now, at least very soon, as the University of California has done, that the work we are at present doing in Freshman English is high-school work not worthy of college credit, and that we should bend our energies toward bringing about conditions under which we could trust the high schools to do this work, and proceed to carry on our own advanced instruction on the basis of the assumption.

d) The most extreme position toward this problem appears to be that taken by Amherst College which, having admitted students to college on the basis of the College Entrance Board Examinations, or, more generally, by certificate, assumes without test the proficiency of the students in composition and puts them at once into a literature course. One instructor in writing of their practice says:

We are beginning to hold an office hour for "special assistance in English." We are also training teachers in all courses to fail papers which show symptoms of advanced illiteracy. As a result we are swamped with applicants and are trying to find a method of handling them. Last Friday I gave a consultation to one student who had written, "Good reading raises us to a plain with God and the angles," and dictated a spelling test to another simultaneously.

Having discovered, then, the student's competence measured by an accepted standard for college English, the college must decide what it will do with those students who have attained the set measure of efficiency. The problem here divides itself into (a) a consideration of machinery for maintaining this standard and for insuring improvement through practice; and (b) a consideration of what use shall be made of the hours in the Freshman course at present devoted to elementary work in composition.

3. Taking the former aspect of the problem first, I suggest as the third proviso in my program that the college shall set itself to devise some machinery to insure the co-operation of other departments in maintaining standards of written work. Such machinery

should facilitate the detection of defective work, and provide for the administration of a remedy.

Harvard University and the University of Indiana are apparently pre-eminent in the attention given to this aspect of our problem, which I consider the most difficult and the most fundamental. Harvard in its catalogue states:

"Students in college whose work in any course is defective in the matter of English are reported to the Committee on the Use of English by Students; they may be required to receive special instruction which will not count for a degree." This work is done in English Composition F, a course said to be "open to students who desire special instruction in writing English. It may be prescribed for students whose use of English is unsatisfactory. It cannot count for a degree."

The administration of this course is in the hands, I believe, of a member of the faculty committee whose special work it is to attend to the instruction of students defective in English and to devise adequate means of supervising and penalizing their written work. By such an arrangement the element of chance and caprice in the detection and reporting of poor work is reduced since the resultant burden does not fall on committees and departments already drugged with detail.

The University of Indiana, according to its catalogue, provides for a Committee on Written and Spoken English. Its system is explained as follows:

Instructors are expected to report such cases as come under their observation to the Committee. In reporting names of such students to the Committee instructors should submit specific evidence of the student's misuse of English in order that the Committee may be better able to determine upon the work to be required of the student. As a minimum it may be necessary merely to admonish the student to write and speak with constant regard to good usage. As a maximum the work assigned may consist of a carefully prescribed course in English 7 classes, or with tutors at the student's own expense; but in all cases without credit. Instructors are requested to co-operate with the committee by noting the spoken and written English especially of those students who have been reported to the Committee.

At Wellesley we have had some measure of success in attacking this problem in two ways. First we have held conferences with groups of departments especially concerned with written work, the history and economics group, the science group, etc. As a result of our discussions we have agreed upon a rather pathetically brief list of minimum requirements for all written work in college.

These requirements, then, we have published in our Freshman English pamphlet, a booklet containing not only information about the routine of our required course, but also models for bibliographical references and footnotes of various kinds, for outlines, card notes, and other matters which every student passing Freshman English should be assumed to have learned. The agreement as to interdepartmental requirements set down in this pamphlet reads as follows:

*Interdepartmental requirements.*—In conference held between the Department of English and other departments it has been agreed that any of the following violations of good form in the preparation of written papers will justify an instructor in refusing to read such papers until the form has been made acceptable.

1. Bibliographical information (bibliography and footnotes) inadequate in *amount* according to the requirements of the particular assignment, or inadequate in *form* according to the standard requirements of the Department of English Composition.

2. Misspelled proper names of scientific terms.

3. Conspicuously faulty punctuation.

4. Conspicuously faulty sentence structure.

5. Paragraph structure insufficient to indicate orderliness and organization of ideas.

6. Outlines in which the headings are not mutually exclusive and parallel in form.

A copy of this pamphlet has this year been sent to every instructor in college with the request that he will hold his students to the constant use of the methods and forms therein prescribed. The instructors in other departments are thus relieved from the duty of teaching such matters as bibliographical forms because the evidence of what has already been thoroughly taught may be produced before the eyes of the plausible offender.

4. Having admitted to college without condition only students whose skill in composition measures up to a reasonable and ascertainable standard, and having devised means to insure their maintenance of this standard in all their writing in college, the colleges shall, according to my fourth proviso, formulate a new course in English which shall assist in sustaining these habits of writing, but which shall at the same time introduce the student to a significant body of new subject-matter, and develop in him mature methods of working and thinking in a unified field. I am inclined to believe that this field should be literary, but Mr. Ralph P. Boas, of the

Springfield (Massachusetts) Central High School, has argued with me cogently that we should devise a group of elementary courses in history, science, economics, home economics, and in literature, taught by instructors who are trained in another field as well as English and permit the Freshman to choose the section most related to his interest and his general educational plan.

I have the notion, however, of an English course which shall at once take the place of the present courses in Freshman composition and Sophomore literature. Its content should be a subject of systematic study for its own sake, in the progress of which constant writing should be required and subjected to careful scrutiny.

The elementary literature courses now offered are generally of three sorts: (1) the survey course; (2) the course in "Types"; and (3) a course entitled "Introduction to Literature" which at times verges on the "types" course, and at others on a somewhat inchoate course in general literature.

All of these courses, I think, are in danger of the same sort of duplication of high-school work as that from which the Freshman composition course suffers. Questions to my Freshmen this year brought out the facts that one-fourth of them had had a survey course in high school. They named as textbooks used such inclusive works, not unknown to college courses, as Moody and Lovett, Halleck, Long, and Pancoast. More than half of them mentioned considerable study of literary types, especially of the drama, short story, and lyric. Quotations from a few of their replies, had we time, would reveal the danger of duplication which we face.

What would be the nature, then, of a prescribed course in English for these students which should do four things: (1) avoid wasteful duplication of high-school work in either composition or literature; (2) provide continual practice in writing under special supervision; (3) develop such nascent interest in literature as the student brings with him to college; (4) introduce him to more mature methods of work and to new ideas through the systematic study of a fresh body of material organically related to the rest of his college course?

In such a course we should use the three hours of the Freshman year or of a half-year, perhaps, for the study of some specific body of material essential to his later course, but we should also create

a normal condition for composition in which writing would be an inevitable tool as it is in other courses in colleges, in which problems of organization, bibliographical reference, and the treatment of sources would rise naturally from the nature of the case. This would obviate the present desperate necessity of the English teacher who must forage widely for material to give the student something to write about, must often pretend to correct long themes on technical subjects concerning which as a specialist in English he has little knowledge, and must while he trespasses on the private preserves of others at the same time neglect almost totally the one field in which he himself may bear authoritative witness. The new English course should probably reduce the quantity of writing, but it should insist on qualities of precision and interest with a view to mending the ways of future American scholars that they may escape the reproach of stylistic pedestrianism from which we at present suffer. Personally, I should like to see this course introduce the student to a body of literature so near his own time in dialect and ideas that he may quickly appreciate its beauty and power as interpretation of life.

It seems to me, then, that in pursuits of its dual aim, effective writing and reading as means to information and appreciation, a Freshman course might well combine certain essentials of the present course in composition, especially the technique of what we call at Wellesley "Source Themes," with the course in Contemporary Literature more or less timidly introduced into the college curriculum in recent years. Through the reading of the literature of his own day first of all, the unliterary student is more readily led to an interest in reading, in ideas rather than in mere facts, and to an appreciation of beauty of form which he can more readily perceive when ideas are couched in the dialect of his own generation. Similarly his habits of writing will be more readily shaped and directed by the study of immediately applicable ideas and ideals expressed in current diction, by men whom he knows to be alive in body and in mind, than by more profound thinking, perhaps, and more subtle expression obscured to him by the archaisms of former days.

I should hope that such literature would be so taught as to make books approachable and pleasure reading familiar, that it

should develop in the scientifically—and in the commercially—minded, as well as in the literary, some habit of extracting ideas from the printed page, some preference for beauty and power of expression rather than for the tawdry and the slipshod and the commonplace on which at present he is so apt to model his own style. With these mental aptitudes even in embryo I believe that many a student would elect a course or two in earlier literature who would otherwise not have done so; for if he has begun with literature close to his own experience he is less likely to accumulate the inhibitions in the presence of the “classics” with which a large proportion of our students emerge from college.

The four provisos which I offer, then, for the reconstruction of our prescribed course in English are:

1. The establishment of a definite and attainable minimum standard of form and usage on which high-school and college teachers are equally agreed.

2. The enforcement of this practicable standard as a prerequisite for college work.

3. The direction of our energies and our ingenuity to devising means of maintaining the good writing-habits with which the students should have entered college.

4. The formulation of a new course which shall combine in a normal way composition and literature, by requiring correct writing as a tool in the course of a systematic study of some body of literature, preferably the literature of the present day.

By such a program as this, which combines the two courses now given by many colleges, wasteful duplication of high-school work would be avoided, I believe, yet a fairly uniform foundation for further work would be assured. Such a program would save, moreover, for many a student for elective purposes some three hours of college work, at the same time that it insured the constant supervision of his writing and the survival of his initial good habits throughout the four years of college.

If the plan sounds Utopian, especially in its first and third provisos, it is because we are more used to expending motor energy in red-inking mistakes, than mental energy in devising means for their prevention.